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PRE-COLUMBIAN PILGRIMAGES IN MESOAMERICA

Before Columbus, Old and New World customs of pilgrimage differed so greatly that separate names today are needed to describe their functions and characters more accurately. In English, pilgrimage and all its synonyms are divided as two families of words, one having to do with *journey*, and the other with *endeavor*.

The Old World family of pilgrimage institutions, including Greco-Roman, Buddhist, Christian and Moslem, are related as individual *journeys* in search of some personal favor, whether divine or human. But the pre-Columbian pilgrimages (here restricted to Mesoamerica) were related as *collective* endeavors for guaranteeing the continuity of the creation of the universe against catastrophic dissolution in an unstable world.

In Aztec religion for instance, each human was regarded as a possible sacrifice needed by gods whose vitality and existence depended on offerings of human blood. Every man was the eucharist, or the complete sacrificial offering on which the continuing life of the gods would depend (Kubler, 1942; Nicholson, 1971).

The Spanish introduction of one god as Father, Son, and Holy

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Ghost rapidly spread the idea of the Christian god dying for man's salvation. This reversed the moral situation in America, from the sacrifice of humans, to the sacrifice of god in the crucifixion and mass, of the body of only one god for all humanity—one symbolic sacrifice repeated at every mass everywhere, instead of the imminent sacrifice of any and every human in order that some gods might live.

After the conquest, Christian pilgrimages appeared in the colonial world under the authority of the Spanish monarchy and Roman Catholic Church. These new and very inviting pilgrimages displaced the harsh, native American, eschatological pilgrimages of endeavor to save the universe. These survived the missionaries' extirpation of idolatry, but only as scattered shreds of ancient American rituals (Kubler, 1946, 395-396; 1961).

Known Mesoamerican Pilgrimages

A preliminary description of late Mesoamerican pilgrimages was outlined by Martinez Marín in 1972. He determined from his reading of colonial sources the existence of at least 18 pre-conquest pilgrimage endeavors, all of them noted at the time of the early colony. Six were in the Basin of Mexico; five in Oaxaca; four in Puebla and Tiaxcala, and three in Yucatán.

The earliest sources are the early colonial manuscripts *Borbonicus* and *Telleriano Remensis*. Both were patterned after the Conquest under Spanish influence, and for Spanish use, to understand native customs. The main Spanish authorities on the subject were Sahagún, Las Casas, Durán, Motolinia, Torquemada, Serna, Florencia, Burgoa, López de Cogolludo, and Landa. All these documents by priests and friars were written to ensure that Christian practices would displace pagan rituals and myths. Their works describe only the customs in use at the time of conquest and colonization.

In the Basin of Mexico the pre-Conquest pilgrimages visited mountains, caves, rivers and springs. The greatest of them was on Tlalocátepetl, near Texcoco. This mountain on the boundaries among the Coatepec, Coatlinchan and Huejotzingo, drew pilgrims from all classes in the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlán, Tacuba and

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Texcoco, as well as Xichimilco, Chalco, Cholula, Tlaxcala and Huejotzingo. The rulers with their retinues convened in the month of *Hueytozoztli* at the precinct of Tlealoc, being lodged, during the sacrifice of a child to the raingod, in *ramadas* built for the purpose. Both Iztaccíhuatl and Popocatépetl were climbed by pilgrims worshipping Chalchiuhtlicue in a cave overlooking the valley of eastern Morelos at Ayauhcalli (house of the mist). Further mountain rituals were periodically performed by crowds convening at the crater lakes on the Nevado de Toluca, and at Ocuila, now the pilgrimage sanctuary of Chalma, where a cave deity was worshipped (Oztoteotl).

Pilgrims also visited caves, rivers and springs throughout the Basin of Mexico on calendrical recurrences, such as the feast of Tepeilhuitl every year. Another of these anniversary events was the New Fire, kindled every 52 years on the Huixachtecatl peak east of Cuitlahuac, to assure the continuity of time at the close of the Mesoamerican count of 18, 980 days.

Adjoining the Basin of Mexico to the east, the principal target of pilgrims was Cholula, where the highest pyramid, called the hand-made mountain (Tlachihualtepetl), had existed for centuries as the home of the raingod. There lords of other realms came to be confirmed as rulers. Las Casas called Cholula the "mother of religion in all New Spain", and Gabriel de Rojas compared it in 1581 to Rome and Mecca, with pilgrims coming from 100 and 200 leagues away (Rojas, 1927: 162).

The temple of Quetzalcóatl at Cholula acquired major importance in the post-classic era, when commemorations of the birth and death of this transcendent figure of the man-deity of tenth-century history attracted large crowds (Willey, 1976: 207-213).

More traditional and less inter-regional were the pilgrimages from this territory to Mount Matlalcueye in Tlaxcala. As at Tlalocatepetl in the Basin of Mexico, a water deity was venerated with offerings and sacrifices of children. Chiautempan near Tlaxcala drew pilgrims to the rites honoring Toci, mother of the gods, from over 40 leagues away. Another was at Tianguizmanalco near Calpan below Popocatépetl, where an important marketplace drew large pilgrimages to the cult of Telpochtli as an aspect of Tezcatlipoca.

Oaxacan pilgrimages are less well documented, and typologically

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distinct from the Central Mexican preceding ones. Burgoa (1934, I: 331) mentioned Apoala as the dwelling of the creator gods, and Achiutla as oracle. Chalcatongo, where Mixtec rulers were buried on a mountain top, was revered in pilgrimages from all parts inhabited by people of their language (Burgoa, I: 337-340). At Justlahuaca in Guerrero, people came from afar to worship deities of water and fertility, in a region where Olmec cave paintings are evidences of early pre-classic worship (Grove, 1970).

Even less is known of the Zapotec sacred places. Teotitlan del Valle was anciently valued in pilgrimage as a place of healing like various Greco-Roman shrines (Arroyo, 1961, II, cited from Martinez Marín, 1972: 176).

In Yucatán Bishop Diego de Landa, who was following an earlier colonial source of 1552-1553 (Tozzer, 1941: 109), mentioned the well of Chichén Itzá and especially Cozumel as pilgrimages comparable to "Jerusalem and Mecca". At Chichén Itzá the well of sacrifice was the center for sacrifices to "all the deities". The entire island of Cozumel was a sanctuary for pilgrimages that reflected the increased maritime commerce of the post-classic age (Sabloff and Rathje, 1975). The focus of the pilgrims was the shrine of Ix Chel, where an oracle was consulted at the "talking" image of the goddess. Izamal also drew pilgrims to its oracle at a shrine (Lopez de Cogolludo, 1842, I, 255-256), thought to be that of a deified ruler with powers of returning the dead to life. These pilgrimages to Cozumel and Izamal come closest to the Old World conception of pilgrimages for the granting of personal wishes, as at the oracle of Delphi, or the medical shrine at Ephesos (Kötting, 1950).

In review, the Mesoamerican pilgrimages were mostly dedicated 1) to water deities; 2) to tribal tutelary gods; 3) to semi-historical men-gods; 4) to deities of health and sickness; 5) at times of the cyclical celebration of beginnings and endings; 6) in association with markets and trade routes (as at Tianguizmanalco and Cozumel). Under the constraints of Mesoamerican hierarchical societies, the pilgrims were of all classes.

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Victor and Edith Turner by definition excluded pre-Columbian examples from their *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978). For this reason only part of their classification of pilgrimages (pp. 17-20) is relevant here. The Turners regard pilgrimages the world over, however, as a "structured route" to a "liminal world where the ideal is felt to be real, where the tainted social *persona* may be cleansed and renewed" (p. 30). They also contend that "the epoch of genesis" is "crucial in determining... the nature of its processual structure" (p. 17). On this assumption they classify all pilgrimages in a historical succession of four types, of which the first two, according to them, occur in all historical religions.

1. The "prototypical", founded by a historical person and remaining consistent in its "root paradigms": examples are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. The pilgrimages to Cholula commemorating events in the life of Quetzalcóatl belong here in the period after A.D. 1000.

2. The "archaic" pilgrimage that is a product of syncretism with other religions: examples are in Celtic and Catholic Ireland: another is Chalma in Mexico blending Catholic and Aztec beliefs.

The Turners' types 3 and 4 are characteristic, in my belief, of Catholicism alone.

3. The "medieval" penitential pilgrimage between AD 500-1400, as at Canterbury in England, Compostela in Spain, and Guadalupe at Tepeyac in Mexico.

4. The "modern" pilgrimage, since the Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth century: Lourdes in France and Fátima in Portugal are typical of many devotions based on Marian apparitions in an industrial world shrunken by mass transportation.

It is noteworthy that the Turner classification does not cover all the Mesoamerican pilgrimage types enumerated here. The calendical type, for instance, at Huixachtecatl (also called Cerro de la Estrella), is unaccounted for in the Turner typology. Conversely there is no known occurrence of penitential or apparitional pilgrimages (which are dominant in the Old World) in pre-Columbian America. The data, however, are probably skewed and biassed, being colonial histories written by Catholic priests and friars who sought to substitute Christianity for native religions. In addition

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these data shed no light on pilgrimages before A.D. 1000. Yet the existence of some prior tradition of pilgrimages seems verified by these accounts, to such a degree that a search for their earlier occurrences in the archaeological record is justified, despite extreme difficulties.

The most extensive and ceremonial continuum in Mesoamerican architecture is the ballgame court. It appears in various forms even beyond Mesoamerican boundaries, in the southwestern United States and in the Caribbean world (T. Stern, 1948; W. Krickeberg, 1948; E. Pasztory, 1972; J. Quirarte, 1972). Evidence of its presence has been suggested for the Olmec horizon (Bernal, 1969:84). Its generic interpretation as symbol of the fragile equilibrium, the state of flux, and the potential destruction of natural order (Knauth, 1961: 197; Helfrich, 1973: 141-145) is supported by textual and iconographic studies. Like churches, mosques and synagogues, the ballgame courts provided a setting and a ritual of action expressive of commonly-held beliefs about the meaning of existence, but within the pleasurable framework of play and sport, attractive to large crowds. In the absence, however, of well-established long-distance communications, the ballgames were always events of local interest, rather than uniting larger spheres of influence. These games between and among neighbors surely were a surrogate for hostility, as between towns ruled by the community, and towns ruled by nobility (Durán, 1971: 314). Like a pilgrimage, the ballgame was a form of association converging at a sacred place for worshipful action, but its competitive nature inevitably dominated any religious content.

At the ballcourt a local small-scope pilgrimage could be performed as a communal endeavor to ensure continuity by a game mimicking the overhead motions of celestial deities. Such ballgames were probably very common, and extremely simple, like sandlot baseball games in neighborhoods today. The players were local people, but the game may also have lessened hostilities among neighboring towns and rulers. There is still no direct evidence that Mesoamerican cities, like those of the Olympiads in the Hellenic World after 776 B.C., used games to resolve conflicts. Among the Quiche in the *Popol Vuh*, ballgames were called "the entertainment of the Kings and other lords" (Edmonson, 1971: 229).

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Pre-Columbian pictorial manuscripts do not as yet yield any clear indication of pilgrimage, although Förstemann (1901: 128) thought that footprints on an idol or a tree trunk "represent the goal of a pilgrimage" (J.E. Thompson, 1972, facs. pp. 25-29). Jill Furst, referring to Codex Zouche-Nuttall, identified as pilgrimage a procession of three males followed by a rain deity (1978: 161 and pl. V), but she does not identify the destination or the ritual more closely.

Pilgrimage And Trade

These are not closely related in ancient America. J.R.A. Lee has supposed that religious pilgrimages were "significant mechanisms in maintaining cultural contact" in ancient Mesoamerica (Lee and Navarrete, 1978: 2-5), but that pilgrimages appeared only after the establishment of commerce, and he urges closer study of the evidence both archaeological and recent.

On the known locations of ancient pilgrimage shrines and routes, however, any congruence with commercial markets and routes is infrequent (Tianguizmanalco and Cozumel). Most Mesoamerican shrines were on high mountain slopes away from trade routes, or in caves of difficult access and at lakes and springs far from travelled paths. Few pilgrimages sought the great marketplaces. Cholula and Chichén Itzá stand out in the known list (Martinez Marín, 1972) as exceptions, attracting early Spanish notices because of their imagined resemblances as *romerias* to Rome and Mecca (Rojas, 1927: 162).

The nonconformity between trade routes and pilgrimage goals has been explained in the history of religions by the thesis that pilgrims are drawn to those places where divine presence is revealed or claimed (B. Kötting, 1950). The pilgrim's journey differs from others in transforming the pilgrim as a preparation for encounter with sacredness. The pilgrim becomes a foreigner (*peregrinus*) on leaving home to experience exhausting physical trials and threatening human encounters, all of them consecrating the journey itself as sacred. The return home is like a rebirth (A. Dupront, 1972: 729) after having suffered alienation both physical and metaphysical through distance and farness. The pilgrim road

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is a trial, requiring support on the road for body and spirit only in part from the sources needed by traders and merchants.

Sahagún characterized the main routes of New Spain as roads (*ohtli*) and highways (*uchpantli*). Others were paths (*uhpitzactli*) or shortcuts (*ixtlapaluhtli*), trails (*ichtaca ohtli*) used by animals and robbers; also footpaths (*icxiuhtli*). Fine new roads were *uhquetzalli*: abandoned paths were *uhzolli*. All roads were generally associated with serpents (*cóatl*) by a kenning that meant undulations among wilderness. The quality of these routes improved near the capital, but no highland roads approached the elevated highways (*sacbeob*) of the Maya peoples, paved and stuccoed on stone foundations (Sahagún, Book 11, Chap, 12; Castillo Farreras, 1969). Only merchants and their servants ventured on these mortally dangerous routes, protected by no universal church and no militia, among territories isolated by steep wildernesses (Litvak, 1978: 117) and connected mainly by secret trails and abandoned paths. No twelfth-century pilgrimage Way of Saint James, as from Paris to Santiago in Spain, ever connected Tenochtitlán or Tula to Chichén Itzá.

In Mesoamerican archaeology, the only extensive study of such a complex of commerce and pilgrimage is at Cozumel and its approaches (Sabloff and Rathje, 1975). The authors characterize the island as "a trading center without any major exportable local resources", and as "a focus of religiotourism" (p. 10), dedicated to a shrine of the goddess Ix Chel, on the maritime trading route around Yucatán from Tabasco to Honduras (D. Freidel, 1975: 107-113).

Some sixteenth-century colonial routes have been mapped by L. Feldman (1978: 141-145) on the record of Fray Alonso Ponce's timed travels in 1586-1587 in Tarascan territory. But such journeys were on European animals among Franciscan *conventos* and *visitas*, and they describe the mendicant regrouping of native populations after the great demographic losses of early colonization, more than pre-Conquest roads.

Perhaps medieval European travel conditions suggest the Mesoamerican setting for pilgrimage. In Europe the rural areas were isolated from one another by barriers to travel which were maintained until after A.D. 1000, when long-distance religious journeys became an emotional need "for all classes of medieval society" (J. Sumption, (975: 115, 302). Like medieval Christians, Mesoameri-

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can peoples may also have obeyed religions in which pilgrimages were a need more than a religious command, as in Islam.

Essential to any discussion of conditions and restraints on early travel in the New World are the arguments of Alonso de Zorita, a judge (*oidor*) of the governing court (Audiencia) of New Spain. His years of travel throughout America, and his sympathetic view of the plight of the Indians under colonial rule, qualify him as a judicious expert. Writing about 1555 he commented at length on the relationship between pre-Conquest Indian taxation by tribute, and fixed residence:

> ...each town or province paid tribute in the things that were grown there, so the people did not have to seek tribute. Never did the people of the *tierra caliente* have to go to the *tierra fria* or vice versa (Zorita, 1963: 186).

On the horrors of forced travel and displacement Zorita continues (pp. 193-194):

> ... there was never any question of moving people from one town to another, or even from one ward (*barrio*) to another. Indeed, they observed as strictly as if it were law (though not through the use of force) the rule that where a man's father and ancestors had lived, there must he live and end his days. As a result there was no uncertainty, change, or confusion in the matter of tribute.

Because tributaries were generally restrained from travel in Mesoamerica, the upper classes of rulers, nobles, priests and merchants were among the few who were able to afford the expense of travel with guards, porters and servants. Among these upper ranks, only the merchants were used to regular travels, and they alone had the necessary geographical experience and knowledge of road conditions over long distances. Only the Mexican *pochteca* and the Maya *ppolom* (M. Acosta, 1945; F. Katz, 1966; Zantwijk, 1970) could maintain the network of agents, couriers, warehouses, and stewards whose services made their travel possible. The merchants established such networks wherever they went for regular trade, which began as commercial penetration, followed by war for the purpose of imposing tribute (Bittman and Sullivan, 1978: 217). In short, facilities for travel were otherwise nonexistent, partly

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because travel was restricted to elite emissaries of economic and military demands for tribute (R.E.W. Adams, 1976: 3). Only the rich and powerful traveled long distances, and inter-regional contacts were limited to the upper classes. None of the conditions for lower-class access to long-range travel was present: spendable income, paid leisure, swift roads, frequent hostels, local friendliness to foreigners, and above all, the production surplus permitting food growers to leave their work for long periods. As we have seen, some trade routes like the Cozumel network, were linked to pilgrimage, but the pilgrims were rich merchants with retinues, bringing offerings to modest local shrines during the layover on a long voyage.

Architectural evidence, however, supports the argument that both highland and lowland urban centers were in some cases designed to receive large crowds of visitors at regular periods. The plazas and concourses of Teotihuacán or Cholula, and Tikal or Copán suggest crowds of many thousands swarming to ceremonies as required by the calendar. At Tikal many graffiti record the passing events of processions and sacrifices, and many vase paintings describe scenes at the court of the rulers (Coggins, 1975). Ballcourts large and small mark the public importance of the games, both local and inter-regional. But at Monte Albán and Xochicalco, as well as in the Guatemala highlands, the fortified mountain-top siting was designed to separate the city from general access (Blanton, 1978; Litvak, 1978).

In this connection the peripheral and frontier emplacement of the major pre-Columbian settlements is noteworthy: Teotihuacán, Tula, Xochicalco, and Tajín were all peripheral at the edges of inner Mesoamerica, like Copán in the Maya area. Palenque is related to a port-of-trade area at an ecological frontier between different climatic regions. In this sense Mesoamerica consists of centrifugal rather than centripetal societies, attracting to urban life and commerce the scattered peoples beyond the border, in a pattern of mutual benefit, that during pre-classic and classic periods may resemble the early commercial and ethnic relation of Hellenic peoples to the barbarian tribes of northern Europe and Russia.

Such were the conditions and restraints on general travel in the western hemisphere, where people had been fewer, and their action upon the environment much briefer than in the Old World. The

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evidence points to merchants and their retinues as the only pilgrims who could command the necessary resources for inter-regional travel at any time before the Spanish Conquest. Thereafter the freedom to travel passed to the new rulers, who were friars and priests, *encomenderos*, and top-rank officials of Spanish colonial government, as well as to the huge new pilgrimages of peoples that emerged at such places as Guadalupe, Chalma, and Esquipulas (Obregón, 1953, Kelsey and Osborne, 1939), in a long-distance and inter-regional extension of European pilgrimage types. These displaced and then absorbed the residues of pre-Columbian ones, by the appeal of a late medieval Christian tradition of a freedom of travel never before guaranteed under native rule in ancient America.

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